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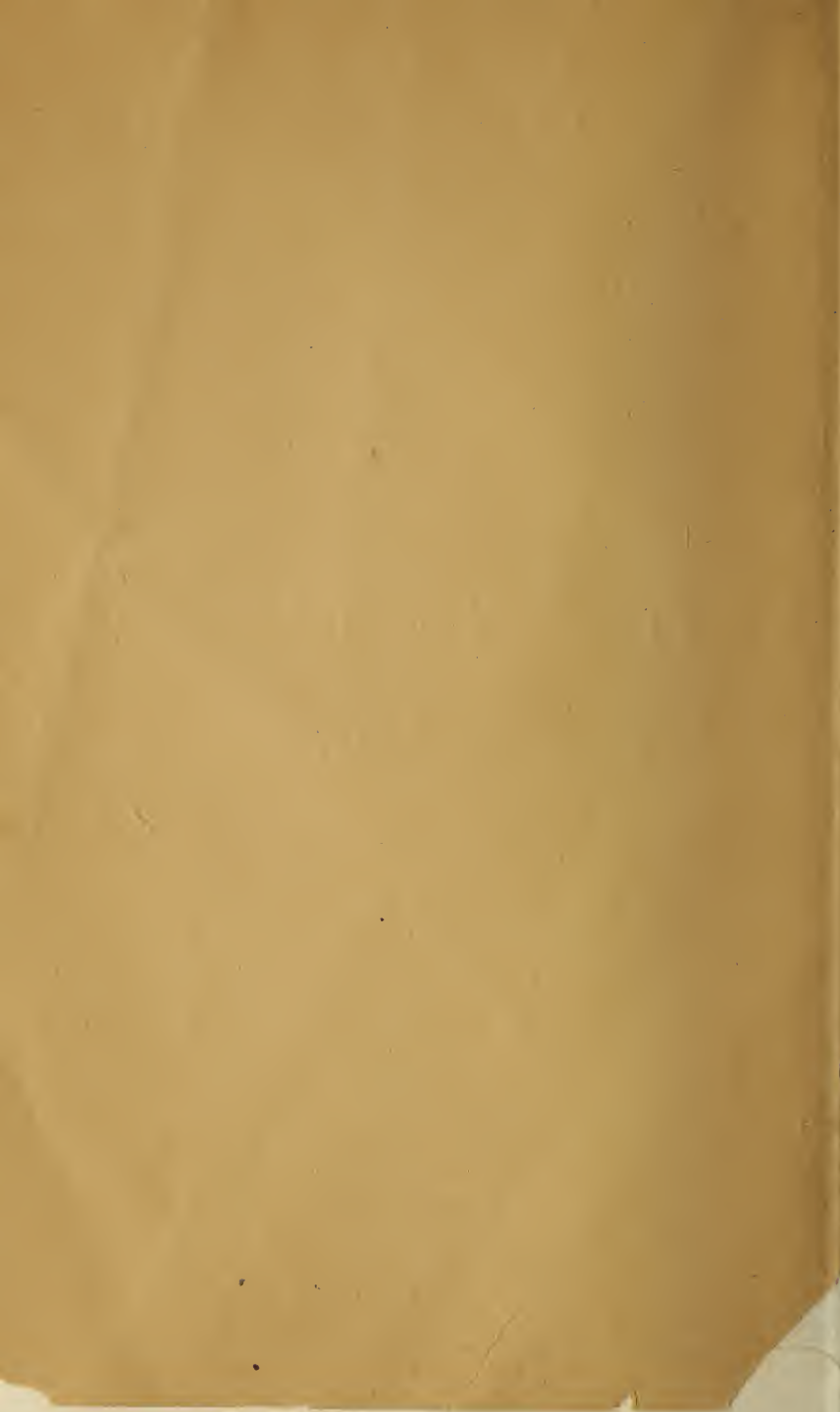
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How Not to Write a Play



HOW NOT TO WRITE A PLAY

✓
BY T. S. DENISON

*Author of the novels, "An Iron Crown," "The Man Behind,"
and twenty-seven plays for amateurs.*

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OBJECT OF THESE PAGES.

There have been books written on the subject of play-writing, but I think such attempts must necessarily in a great measure fail of their object, because no one can impart successfully to others the peculiar methods and qualities which may have resulted in success in his own case. I think it best to give this little pamphlet the title, "HOW NOT TO WRITE A PLAY," because many of the things *not* to be done are so apparent. It is not expected that the few negative directions given in these pages will enable any novice to write a good play. But if carefully observed they will result in the production of a play that will at least have a decent appearance and thus secure a reading by publishers and managers. While these few pages are aimed at amateurs, I take it that the dramatist necessarily begins experimentally and usually requires some practice before scoring a success. Possibly these few hints may direct aright latent capacity that may eventually produce something destined to appear upon the stage.

The necessity of some brief directions such as these has been made apparent to me in the course of my own experience as author and publisher. For seventeen years I have been reading plays, three-fourths of which were the veriest trash. The rage for scribbling plays attacks the young person very violently and subsides (I believe) at a comparatively tender age, thank heaven! The desire to produce a novel usually comes later, and in many instances the unhappy victim is afflicted for life. If any effort of mine can aid in the slightest in averting this vain sacrifice of good ink, I shall feel amply repaid.

HOW NOT TO WRITE A PLAY.

GENERAL VIEW.

1. An essay divided by headings into acts and scenes is not a play. A school dialogue is not a play.

2. Do not think that anybody can write a book, or, what is still more difficult, a play.

3. If you are under twenty-one, of the male sex, and have ever belonged to any sort of dramatic club, you probably think you can write a better play than any you have seen. Publishers may think differently.

4. Do not think because you have led a "barnstorming" company "on the road" and have "counted ties," that you know all about play writing. You probably do know a great deal more than the last mentioned young man.

5. Do not think the public is anxiously expecting a new play from you; there are some 5,000 plays more or less in English alone. Still, there is always room for good new plays. They are very scarce.

6. Do not take a popular "fad" for a subject, as a rule. It may go out of date before you can get your MS. accepted. Such things if short do well for immediate use.

SNAP SHOTS.

1. Do not flatter yourself that because you "just dashed off" a thing, that it must be good. The things that are "just dashed off" are usually dashed into the waste basket.

2. Do not think that grammar, spelling and probability are of no consequence in a play; they are.

3. Do not think the public prefers slang, profanity and bombast, to good English and refined sentiments.

4. Do not think the publisher (or manager) will "fix up" your play. He has not the time, and would not do it if he had.

5. Do not persuade yourself that you can steal a plot from some book or "lift" somebody else's play and no one will ever detect the fraud. You are underrating the sagacity of other people.

6. Do not introduce a clown under the guise of a comedy character, to drag in forced witticisms on every possible occasion. Let your comedian know his place.

7. Do not think that your "villain" must be a black-guard and a fool as well. A bad man does not necessarily spout, use bad grammar and threaten at a moment's notice without provocation. Nor will a swarthy complexion and a made-up voice alone constitute a villain.

8. Do not try a five-act play first. Attempt a little farce or short comedy. Real humor *always* takes.

9. Do not forget for a moment that you must know something yourself. Eggs are necessary to an omelet. If you confine yourself to what you know (illumined by a touch of imagination) your characters and scenes may prove natural and successful.

10. Let the aristocracy of Europe alone. America is large enough to begin on. You can branch out later.

11. Do not delude yourself with the idea that a forged will is a novelty.

12. Do not put caves, castles and mountains on the stage promiscuously. These things are only for the professional stage, and then sparingly. I once had a play submitted which contained eighteen scenes, and it was intended for amateurs, too. Remember that when a scene is set, say for the first and third acts, the second time is a resetting and will require some time. Amateurs usually cannot make these difficult sets even if you put them in well.

13. Do not, I beg you, put long speeches and explanations into the play. The plot must explain itself as it goes.

14. Do not introduce politics or religion. And do not excuse or gloss immorality.

15. Do not moralize.

16. Do not stray from your subject. Let your play have a well defined thread, and let every incident aid the central idea.

17. Do not try to get a whole village full of people into your play. More than twelve characters (about two-thirds male) will endanger your chance of success. "Variety business" is not drama.

18. Do not think that any one class of people (old maids, for example) were created specially for the amusement of the rest of mankind. Sympathy is the keynote to success.

19. Do not put ridiculous nonsense and impossible brogue into the mouths of foreigners. If you want to put an Italian or a Dutchman into a play, study carefully the conversation of Italian and Dutch people, then imitate it as closely as possible.

20. Do not forget that your characters are human and should act very much as you and I would under the circumstances. They should be *consistent*, but this does not mean that it is impossible, for instance, for a serious man to laugh. In fact, you may show your skill in making him laugh if you do it in the right way at the right time.

25. Do not employ dungeons, trap-doors and poisoned daggers. These things are ancient.

26. Beware of the lachrymose female who diligently sheds tears, wailing meanwhile, "Oh, God, my child! my child!" and that equally difficult one who with fine indignation, in falsetto tones cries, "Unhand me, sir!"

27. Do not get your hero into a furious row, nor your heroine into great peril without adequate and apparent reasons. Remember a thing which would appear absurd and improbable in real life will appear so on the stage. The slightest absurdity in a serious scene turns it into burlesque. Farce is to some extent an exception to all rules, but even farce must be *possible*, and the more probable the better.

28. Do not employ "gags" and stock phrases too often. Good plays are often spoiled by injudicious tinkering. Slang is not wit.

29. Do not think yourself above intelligent criticism, but do not seek incompetent criticism.

30. Do not imitate some other play. You are merely trying to warm over a dish which all have partaken of fresh.

31. Do not work your best things into the first part. Keep them later till the audience is ready (and possibly tired). In a book the reverse is true; there some of the best features must come first to arouse interest.

32. Do not mistake *length* for *strength*. Three thousand to five thousand words (not including stage directions) make a good farce; ten thousand to fifteen thousand, a comedy. You must consider the time required between acts. A full resetting requires from five to fifteen minutes by professionals. Amateurs need a little more time.

PREPARING MANUSCRIPT.

1. Underscore the name of each character at the beginning of a speech.

2. Write on only one side of the paper and do not crowd the matter. It pays to write on good paper.

3. Put stage directions in parentheses.

4. For a parlor play do not employ the R. U. E., L. U. E., etc., of the professional stage. In a parlor play a door at right and one at left to give entrances and exits is ample. Then merely say, "exit James, left," "right," etc. Arrange furniture as you found it best in rehearsal and explain this in "scene plot" at first of play. Chimneys, balconies, etc., can only be arranged properly where there is a stage. A screen properly placed serves to conceal a character. Simple devices are always best.

5. Give synopsis at first to aid the publisher's "reader," as well as to help the stage manager.

6. Revise! *revise!* REVISE! Not once, but a dozen times if necessary. When done revising, copy carefully with pen, or better, on typewriter.

7. Punctuate, and use capitals properly. Neglect of this feature indicates one of two things: either you lack the necessary training to do your work properly, or you are not sufficiently interested in your work to do it well. Either hypothesis condemns you. This caution applies to *all* written work.

8. Write your full name and address on a sheet attached to the manuscript. Do not trust to a letter which may get separated from the copy. I have before me at this writing an appalling MS., the size of an atlas, the sole address of which is "J. Henderson, care U. S. M. P. Co., Boston."

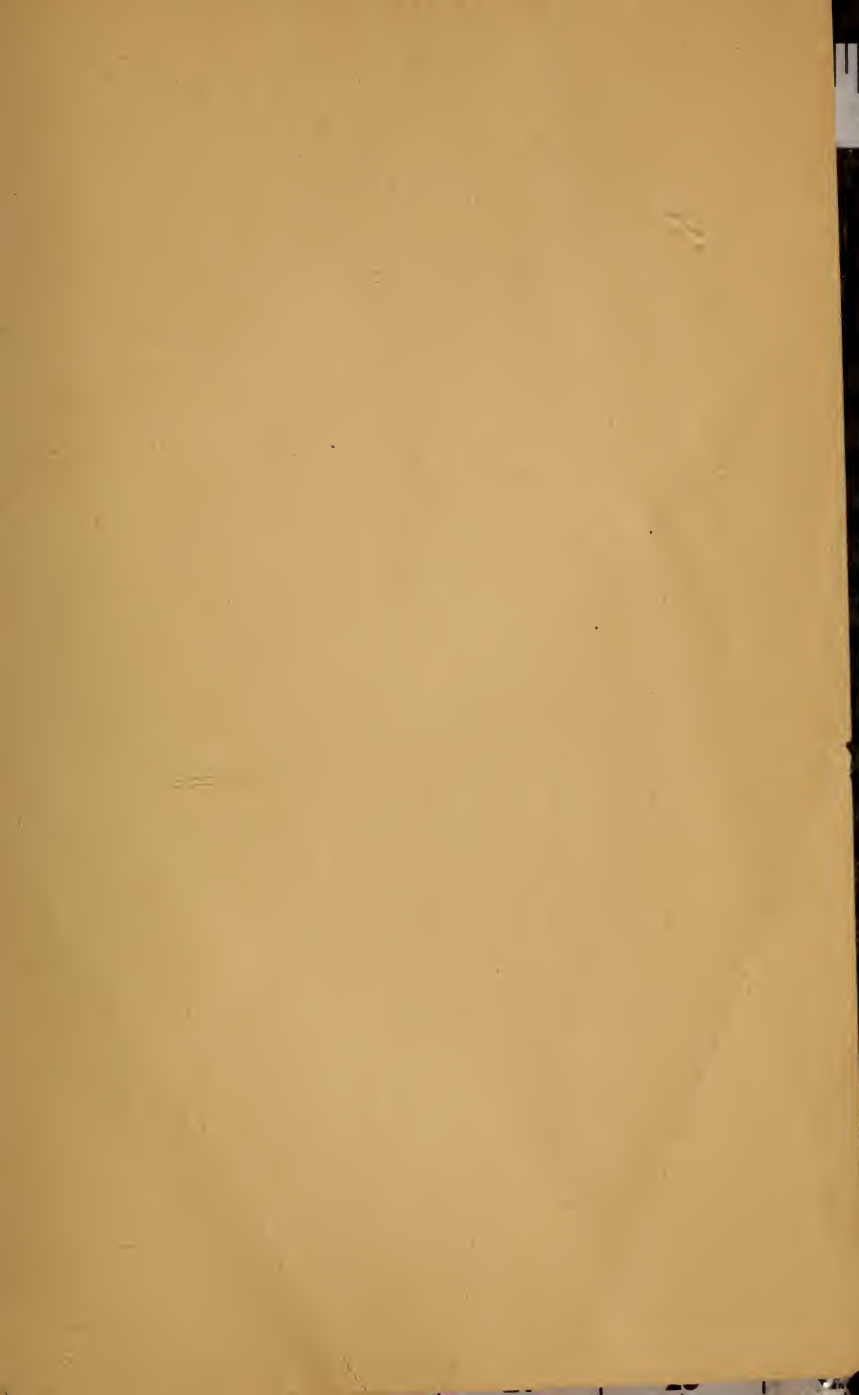
9. Inclose stamps for return, and do not complain if you get no reply for a month (sometimes longer).

10. Do not roll a MS. ; send it *flat*.

11. Send stamps for return post.

12. If your MS. has been rejected do not write asking *why*. Keep it six months, then read carefully and probably you can discover the *why* without assistance.

NOTE.—It was not possible in the brief space of these few pages to attempt any considerable analysis of the mechanism of a drama. The Greeks invariably divided a play into five acts. Fewer acts often suffice in modern plays. *Three* well marked divisions may be recognized even by amateurs. They are briefly: (1) *Suggestion of the plot*. (2) *Unfolding of the plot*. (3) *The denouement*. If more than three acts are employed the additional acts relate to number 2, the unfolding of the plot. Each act should end with a climax. An excellent article on play writing was published in *Lippincott's Magazine*, September, 1889.



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